

MARKETPLACE

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Teen Books Are Hot Sellers, But Formula Isn't Simple

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TRACHTENBERG

LARRY DOYLE, a former Emmy-winning writer for "The Simpsons" TV series, frequently pens comic pieces for the New Yorker. Although he is 48 years old and has three children, his sensibilities lean to the youthful.

So when Mr. Doyle got an idea for a novel, it wasn't a stretch for him to write about being a teenager. His book "I Love You, Beth Cooper," which will be published May 8 by News Corp.'s Ecco imprint, opens with a nerdy high-school senior giving a graduation speech. He then veers from his prepared text and declares his love for the school's prettiest cheerleader. The 24 hours that follow are either the best or the worst of his life.

"Most of my dreams involve high school or college, along the lines of, 'I forgot to take the midterm,'" Mr. Doyle says. "In this case, I dreamt the opening scene."

But when it came to turning this into a book, Mr. Doyle found that his teenage theme brought with it some difficult choices. Last April, Mr. Doyle's agent, Sarah Burnes of the Gernert Co., began showing about 100 pages of "Beth Cooper" to publishers—several geared to adults, but also a dozen "young adult" imprints that court readers 12-to-16 years old.

Although there aren't any

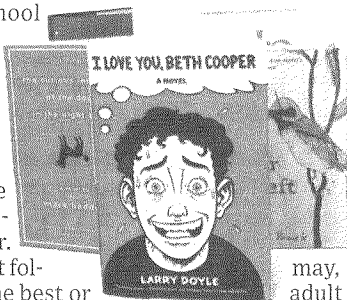
hard numbers, publishers say young adult is a hot category at a time when bookstore sales declined about 3% last year. However, determining whether a book should get a young-adult label is more art than science, and brings with it an array of complicated issues for authors, publishers and retailers.

"A big part of the reason publishers are so excited about this market is that it's never been easier to find and stay connected with teen readers," says Michael Norris, a senior analyst at Simba Information in Stamford, Conn. Author Web sites, blogs, MySpace pages and mobile phone campaigns, he adds, can reach a big audience.

To Mr. Doyle's dismay, potential young-adult editors told him in explicit detail how they intended to "shape" his book for their readership. Their advice included: Tell it in the first person, increase the female quotient and write chapters in which male and female narrators alternate. This carefully manicured approach, he was told by one publishing house, was "what we usually do."

Elise Howard, associate publisher at HarperCollins Children's Books, on the other hand, read Mr. Doyle's "Beth Cooper" manuscript but passed on it because she felt Mr.

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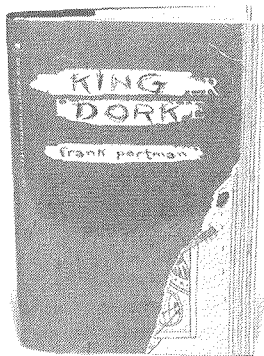
Teen or grown-up?

The Formula for Teen Books Isn't Simple

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Doyle's voice would be best appreciated by older readers.

The decision on what audience to go for is a crucial one. Mark Haddon's novel "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time," written from the point of view of an autistic child, became a blockbuster in 2003 after U.S. editors at Doubleday decided it would appeal to adult readers. **Scholastic Corp.**, which publishes the Harry Potter series in the U.S., decided to market a single edition to both adults and kids, starting with the first title, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," published here in 1998. By contrast, **Bloomsbury Publishing PLC**, which publishes Harry Potter in the U.K., issues each title in an adult edition and a children's edition—covers of the kids' editions boast bright colors while the adult versions are more subdued.

Most recently, James Prosek's novelistic treatment of his mother's decision to abandon husband and children, "The Day My Mother Left," was published in the U.S. as a young-adult title, even though Mr. Prosek's prose reads like a book aimed at older readers.



'King Dork' is aimed at young adults.

What do kids want? Emily Farrell, who teaches English and creative writing at Strath Haven High School, Wallingford, Pa., says teens like satire and humor. But the reading choices cross categories. Older teen girls may read such "adult" authors as Candace Bushnell, Jennifer Weiner and Alice Sebold, while younger girls like "young adult" writers such as Louise Rennison. Older teen boys, for instance, read books by mainstream writers such as Carl Hiaasen, Tim Dorsey and Dave Barry.

Young-adult branding can be a double-edged sword. Many publishers think that teens like to "read up," which means that they don't want to shop in a section of the store focused on teenagers. Yet retailers say their young-adult sections are pulling in the kids. Their offerings often go beyond the formulaic. Craig Schiff, an 8th grader in Larchmont, N.Y., says he has bought and read such books as "Watership Down" and "Lord of the Flies," in young-adult sections. "I'm not reading books about teenagers," he says. "I like good books."

"Often the young-adult titles are too young. We don't want to lose them if they've outgrown 'The Princess Diaries' series," says Vivien Jennings, owner of **Rainy Day Books**, an independent bookstore in Fairway, Kan.

Publishers, she notes, try to bolster their young-adult titles by advertising in such magazines as *Seventeen* and *Teen People*, or by posting related videos on YouTube.com. Some authors have also launched blogs. "Publishers are trying to tune into whatever teens are paying attention to, and go where teens hang out," she adds.

In the end, Mr. Doyle's "I Love You, Beth Cooper" was bought by HarperCollins's Ecco imprint, which is marketing the novel to adults. "It talks to 15-year-olds and to those watching Jon Stewart every night," says his editor, Lee Boudreaux. Previously, when she worked at **Bertelsmann AG's Random**

House, she acquired and published Curtis Sittenfeld's "Prep," a book about high school that was marketed to adults. It became a best-seller in 2005.

Mr. Doyle is happy with his choice. He thinks there's a stigma attached to young-adult books, as there is with "chick lit" aimed at women readers. "If 'To Kill a Mockingbird' or 'The Catcher in the Rye' were published today, they'd almost certainly be young-adult titles," he says. "But then they wouldn't become classics, except in the sense that Judy Blume books are classics."

Frank Portman, author of "King Dork," a highly acclaimed novel last year that was marketed as a young-adult title, doesn't see the label as limiting. "Literary and music categories are more porous today," Mr. Portman says. "You write about an adolescent, explore the mind of an adolescent, comment on pop culture as seen through the adolescent's eyes, and you get readers who are in their 30s and 40s."

But he admits to one drawback: Some people ask him when he's going to write a "real book."